

[Review] Maggie Berg and Barbara K Seeber (2016) The slow professor: challenging the culture of speed in the academy

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I was ready to dislike this book. The premise of slowness as a response to an increasing pace of life in academia has the potential to fit within an ever-expanding self-help literature that relentlessly focuses on the individual's responsibility for their 'productivity'. Such an approach, while it may acknowledge that increasing workloads and pressures are real, and may even connect the changes to broader structural shifts such as the rise of metrics, nonetheless focuses on the individual's capacity and responsibility to manage change. The notion of individual management is surely implied in this book's title: *The Slow Professor*. And yet the subtitle, *Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, makes clear that this is a book about resistance to a culture, and not merely the individual's management of it.

A real value of the book is its insistence that changes in university cultures are not about outlying individuals changing their practices alone but rather about the *relationships* between individuals and their struggles together to create different cultures through small acts. Pithy examples are given of the approach the authors do *not* endorse, such as the continual delegation of work to professional support staff and graduate students. This is a refreshing change to the advice frequently given, especially to PhD students and early-career staff, that getting on hinges on protection of time to focus on 'your own work' (a commonly-heard phrase which implies a sharp distinction and hierarchy between individual research and the more collective aspects of academic life).

The limitation of the book is its vagueness about the different sorts of conditions in different sorts of university. This is surprising given the focus on universities as communities rather than, as in Clark Kerr's famous words, 'a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking' (1963: 15). All academics experience an increasing pace of life in the workplace, no doubt, but the specific form this takes, the lived experience of it and, crucially, the avenues available for resistance are starkly different.

This is not to say that anyone is so hemmed in by the conditions of their workplace that they are incapable of making meaningful changes to it. It is to say that what such change can reasonably be expected to look like is affected by broader conditions within an institution.

In recent interviews with academics at different career stages at three very different English universities, conducted as part of an ongoing research project, my participants often offered accounts of their experiences in terms of time. All experienced and were concerned about time constraints both upon their day-to-day activities and their longer-term plans. Yet the actual degree of control over time (and not merely the sense of it) differed starkly between institutions. In one small post-war university, which had experienced a rapid rise in university rankings owing to a brief change in management, very quick decisions were made, and degrees culled, as an often jumpy response to student numbers. This was accompanied by a feeling that rapid senior management decisions could not be predicted, negotiated with, or even really understood.

As in the slow movement in food and other areas of life, the privileging of slowness over speed is *classed*. It can be related to a long history of distancing strategies put in place between the leisured classes and both the working class, characterised by immediate gratifications, and the anxious petty-bourgeoisie. Control over one's time is a form of privilege, and while we can all develop strategies to manage time pressures and to change cultures in our immediate environment, we should be mindful of the capacity of the slow

movement to feed into nostalgia for an elite system when there was more time precisely because there were fewer students. Some universities remain much closer to this mythical past than others.

None of this is to say that the book fails to deliver on its subtitle's wish to challenge the culture of speed. It offers thought-provoking suggestions for a healthier relationship to time in the academy while avoiding many of the pitfalls of the academic self-help book: indeed its humorous critique of that genre is a resource in itself. It is a very useful building block in the endeavour to create a different set of university cultures: but this set of cultures is likely to remain plural, differentiated and hierarchical for a long time to come.

Reference

Kerr C (1963) *The Uses of the University*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.